

Matthew 1:18-23

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

Even though I love summer and hate winter, this is my most favorite time of the year. I love Christmas! It's not because of the gifts and festivities. It's because of Jesus - God's gift of love to us. I love the beautiful story of the birth of Jesus. Today is the 4th Sunday of Advent; the Sunday of Love. It is out of love that the almighty creator of the heavens and the earth gives to us the best gift that we have ever received. God's gift of love to us is the very best gift that God has to give. Last week I talked about Isaiah and the prophecy of Immanuel which means God is with us. Matthew knew Jesus as a divine presence - God is with us. Matthew saw Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah and Matthew saw Jesus as the Son of God.

Today's Scripture is one that we are all familiar with - the birth of Jesus. Matthew from the very beginning of the gospel identifies Jesus as the Messiah. This is the same as Jesus Christ, putting name of Jesus and the title of Christ together as one. Messiah is Hebrew for the anointed one and Christ is Greek for the anointed one. Matthew starts off the gospel by proclaiming this is the one that was promised by God, through the Old Testament prophets; this is the one people have been waiting for.

Matthew gives some details of the setting and context of the birth. Mary was engaged to Joseph. The word that gets translated as engaged is actually betrothed. The word means more than engaged. They are considered to be married but not yet living together. Matthew goes from saying they were engaged to calling Joseph her husband. This is because the word betrothed is a hybrid word between engaged and married that means much more than our English language translates. In the New Testament marriage had three phases. The engagement was arranged by the fathers when the boy and the girl were children. The betrothal is a formal ratification of the marriage arrangement that lasts for about a year. This is where Mary and Joseph are in the relationship. During this phase the couple is legally bound to each other and are referred to as husband and wife. They do not live together. They do not have sexual relations with each other or anyone else. If the man dies then the woman is considered a widow. The wedding ceremony lasted a whole week. This is when the marriage is consummated and they move into the household of the husband.

Joseph is a righteous man. Even though the evidence indicates that he has been betrayed by an unfaithful wife his plan is to keep Mary's apparent adultery hidden. His concern is for her well being over his honor. This is extremely rare in that culture because everything in a patriarchal society is all about the man's honor. Then an angel visits him in a dream and sets the record straight. The angel tells Joseph to name the boy Jesus which means rescue or save us.

Matthew proclaims this is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and Matthew specifically proclaims that God is with us.

In today's Scripture the focus is on Jesus but there is a valuable lesson here on righteousness. Take a moment and imagine you are Joseph. Before we can put ourselves in Joseph's shoes we need to understand that a patriarchal society is a social system where men held all the power, political leadership, moral authority, and social privilege. The men had control of all the property and they controlled the women. The women had no rights. All property was held by the men and inherited by the male lineage. It was a culture of complete dominance and everybody supported this structure. In this environment, honor is the most important thing. If woman is raped she does not get vengeance. The husband, father, or brothers have the duty to protect their own honor. Her honor, anger, or vengeance, is not an issue in that culture. Joseph has the right to protect his honor; it is all about the honor of the man. It is highly unusual for Joseph to even consider her honor. But Joseph is portrayed as a righteous man. Joseph is also faithful. The evidence is that Mary is unfaithful. It is virtually impossible to dispute evidence. The evidence tells you what is going on in a case. The evidence reveals that there is no other alternative, no second guessing, there is only one way Mary can be with child. For most any man, this would be a disgrace and he would get rid of her. However, because Joseph is faithful he believes the word of the angel over what would otherwise be physically impossible. Joseph is not stressed out by all of this. He is full of faith and confidence and abides by the word of God delivered by the angel and names the baby Jesus because he is our savior. We celebrate Christmas which means Christ-Mass, the mass of Christ because God is with us.